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**FLOW AND FANTASY:
AN EXPLORATION OF ROLE-PLAYING GAMES**

Andrew Roy
May 6, 1994
Anthropology Honor's Thesis
Jack Glazier ✓

*This thesis is dedicated to my Mother,
who thinks these games are a waste of time.*

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CHAPTER 1:

BACKGROUND

This chapter lays out the conceptual foundation that one must possess in order to examine the role-playing game phenomenon. First, I will present what has been done in the scholarly community on rpgs. This section will also serve as a justification for this study. In the second section, I will examine the games themselves, explaining their form and history to the reader.

SECTION 1:

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP

Considering the massive popular impact that role-playing games have had over the last two decades, there is remarkably little scholarship on them. Scanning across anthropological and sociological literature, one can find almost nothing that explicitly concerns this genre of play. With rare exceptions, the recent literature is still primarily dedicated to children's play, traditional games, and general theory.

The only major work that I have encountered is Gary Alan Fine's 1983 work, *Shared Fantasy*. This book is a brilliant first step in the analysis of role-playing games. It is a behavioral and ethnographic look at the subculture

of "gamers" -- those who play role-playing games. He provides a nuanced depiction of the social setting surrounding rpgs. His primary purpose in writing the book is to examine certain "sociological questions--questions that have not been widely addressed elsewhere, and for which this particular social world can provide some answers" (1). Within this scope, Fine does an excellent job of presenting the players of these games.

In Fine's work, the role-playing community is an example of a "contemporary urban leisure subculture" (1). His analysis is therefore aimed at understanding the games in their function as the nucleus of a social world. There is a great deal of material discussing the similarities and differences between members of this subculture, and how they "generate meanings and identities" (Fine 1983:1) within the context of their gaming role. In order to understand what the subculture revolves around, Fine engages in some theoretical speculations about the nature of rpgs. Although this does not constitute the focus of his work, Fine uses Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) to produce a brilliant structural model of rpgs which is striking in both its elegance and its explanatory power.

Due to Fine's research goals, there are significant fields of analysis that he does not approach. Fine takes a highly emic perspective, attempting to take his informant's words at face value. In the words of a reviewer, "one is

struck by the author's avoidance of interpretive perspectives, especially in regard to psychology and cultural studies" (Dayan 1224). Fine provides a descriptive work which sketches the broad theoretical limits of rpgs and affords a relatively thorough examination of the subculture which surrounds them. He does not, however, spend much time examining how rpgs function in a larger context. Nor does he explore what the inherent attraction of the activity is, beyond stating that "fun is the central reason--sociological, psychological, and otherwise--why they [rpgs] have become so popular" (Fine 1983:xii). In sum, Fine is not primarily concerned with role-playing games themselves, but rather with the subculture that surrounds them -- he examines the ripples but neglects the rock.

Beyond the boundaries of anthropology, there are some scattered academic works largely in the field of psychology. They are usually concerned with the psychological effects of rpgs, primarily *Dungeons and Dragons* (e.g. Simón 1987, DeRenard and Kline 1990, Holmes 1980).¹ These articles are typically short studies with quite specific goals, such as determining whether or not *D&D* players are more emotionally unstable than average populations.² Although such studies

¹ The distinction between *D&D* and rpgs will be clarified further on in the essay. For now it is sufficient to know that *D&D* is a specific game within the role-playing game genre.

² DeRenard and Kline (1990) find that *D&D* players report "fewer . . . feelings of meaninglessness than nonplayers" (1219), but that players tend to express "greater feelings of alienation" (1222) than nonplayers. Simón (1987) finds "no significant correlation" (332) between playing *D&D* and emotional instability.

are interesting, they are not intended to enrich the theory of play and fall well outside the realm of anthropological inquiry. They are significant to this study in that they debunk certain outlandish claims of extremists in the polemics over rpgs. Opponents cry out that rpgs promote violence, suicide, and Satanism (among other diabolical activities).³ Opposing these folk are the gamers with their own share of zealots who claim that, for example, rpgs imbue one with the wisdom of the ages. The psychological literature paints a more mundane picture:

Indeed, as a whole group, D&D players obtain a healthy psychological profile . . . It appears, then, that in those cases wherein the individuals had previously played D&D, the game may have simply been an incidental, irrelevant aspect, rather than an etiological factor. (Simón 1987:332)

In contrast to the meager academic scholarship on rpgs, there exist a plethora of popular works on the subject. In addition to the endless stream of consumer products available from gaming companies, there are a great many novels, tracts, and articles which either attack or defend rpgs (again usually *Dungeons and Dragons*) for various reasons. These sources cover a broad spectrum of perspectives, extending across the mainstream news media (e.g. Adler and Doherty 1985, *New York Times* 1985), religious organizations (e.g. Weldon and Bjornstad 1984; Bennett, Enlo, and Grunberg 1984), consumer interest groups

³ For a well-balanced recent examination of the claims of Satanism in particular, see "Satanic Cults, Satanic Play: Is 'Dungeons & Dragons' a Breeding Ground for the Devil?" (Martin and Fine 1991).

(e.g. Pulling, Loyacono, and Dempsey n.d.), and even the work of private investigators (e.g. Dear 1984).⁴

The mere existence of such a gap between scholarship and popular literature does not necessarily indicate any academic delinquency -- but it does require an explanation. An obvious reason might be that role-playing games are simply a passing fad, a flash in the pan, and thus do not merit scholarly attention. They have not, one might argue, significantly changed society, and thus offer no new perspectives on the study of play and games. Such an argument is, of course, flawed by the very existence of the controversy over the games -- which suggests that rpgs are indeed having an influence on society.

CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

There is a great deal more evidence for this influence than simply the existence of controversy. In the two decades of the genre's existence, rpgs have founded a multi-million dollar game industry. Their influence has crossed into many other realms of games too, spawning a profusion of board games, card games, and computer games, that are based on themes brought to light by rpgs. The effects of this popularity have even extended into other cultural domains.

In literature there is a vast array of fantasy books to

⁴ Predictably enough, the controversy over role playing games only cemented their place within the gaming world: "All over the country, people flocked to the stores to buy this game [D&D]. Stores could not keep up with the demand, and even TSR Hobbies, Inc., the manufacturer, soon completely exhausted its supply" (Weldon and Bjornstad 1984:18).

be gobbled up by eager adolescents and adults alike. The genre of heroic fantasy (which appears alongside science-fiction in smaller bookstores) was a minor genre (at best) prior to *Dungeons and Dragons*⁵. Long out of print classics by H.P. Lovecraft and Fritz Leiber, among others, have been reprinted due to popular demand.

The rise of rpgs has also coincided with certain new genres in the film industry. Fictive adventure films featuring charismatic heroes facing and overcoming unbelievable odds have become increasingly popular. Heroic plots are nothing new, of course, but the themes and imagery in recent incarnations of these plots convey a mood which is quite distinct from earlier forms. Daniel Dayan (1986), of the University of Southern California, has argued that American cinema of the seventies and eighties is a prime example of how rpgs have "infiltrated" American culture. He sees a "consistent reorientation" of thematic content to meet the changing demands of the market, which is primarily made up of teenagers and young adults. He is struck by the similarities between these cinematic trends and role-playing games, and feels that these similarities are more profound than many might suppose. Dayan proposes that rpgs might

⁵ This is not to say that fantasy literature was invented in the seventies! Rather, it was a small sub-category of science-fiction or horror, and would not have required more than a few shelves. In most large bookstores now, one can find case after case filled with tales of high adventure, sorcery, mythical beasts, and the like -- most set in imaginary worlds created by the author.

therefore be causally linked to these cultural metamorphoses:

Raiders of the Lost Ark is not very different from a game of Dungeons and Dragons. The macho attitudes and uninhibited violence of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* reflect those of FRP gamers. The intergalactic world of *Star Wars* is depicted in an ethnographic detail reminiscent of Tekumel [a fantasy world] and includes the classical FRP [fantasy role-playing] mixture of androids, mythological beings co-opted into the fictional fauna, and, among humans, the same distribution of warriors, wizards, clerics, and thieves.

One also finds the same apocalyptic climate, the theme of a world condemned or surviving its doom, where most restraints have been swept away. One wonders whether the games and films draw from the same sources, or whether the films are transpositions of the themes proposed in the games, that is, translations of the games' ethos into mass culture....

All this suggests that, marginal as it may well be, the FRP gaming subculture either has enjoyed a tremendous impact on the culture at large or must be read as a very sensitive index of the transformations undergone by this culture. (1227)

Dayan makes some bold but penetrating claims about role-playing games -- he effectively removes them from their customary position as a mere cultural tangent and places them into a much more central cultural relationship. The cultural transformations are readily apparent, as are the thematic similarities between rpgs and certain media motifs. What is less certain is how much importance one can ascribe to role-playing games as the basis for these changes.

One must be wary of oversimplifying the complexities of these cultural dynamics into a linear, causal relationship. Dayan claims that either rpgs have been a major influence on (and source of) particular cultural motifs or that they have merely *reflected* these independent cultural changes. The situation is more likely to be one of mutual reinforcement. The success of rpgs and the growth of heroic fantasy films

and literature are perhaps related means of dealing with a common social problem. They might be modern ways of finding meaning in an increasingly complex and anomic world. I will explore this possibility after we have examined rpgs in greater depth further on in this essay.

Whether or not one is convinced that rpgs indeed play such a significant role in modern culture, such a possibility suggests that rpgs have the potential to be a rich subject of scholarship. There is evidence that rpgs are not as marginal as might first be imagined, and that their influence can be detected across many more "serious" cultural domains than just that of play -- film and literature being but two examples.

PLAY

What, then, of the domain of play itself? I have indicated that rpgs are worthy of study due to their relationship with the surrounding cultural system, but do they have anything to offer the anthropology of play? Rpgs certainly provide an example of the introduction of a new form of play into the constantly shifting amalgam of play forms that are enjoyed in our culture.

More importantly, rpgs are an example of a complex genre of play that blurs traditional distinctions within the study of play. Rpgs are rule-bound, thus placing them in the category of games. They are centered on collective fantasy, however, which is usually classified as a free play

type of activity. It is difficult to compare rpgs to any single form of play. Different aspects of the games can be compared to a diverse collection of other ludic activities - from chess to poker, computer games to playing house.

Role-playing games pose a serious challenge to play theorists. They present an immensely complex form of play which is infinitely variable in its content. Moreover, the very structure of any given game is itself highly mutable, and can (and *must*) be modified by the participants as they play.

It should be clear that rpgs present scholars with a rich and multi-faceted genre for examination. Scholars from numerous disciplines (anthropology, sociology, psychology, literature, and theater to name some obvious examples) would be well-served to explore this genre. The relationship between role-playing games and popular culture is one realm in which there has been no scholarship. The structure and nature of the games themselves have been only touched upon. The psychological aspects of the games as collective fantasies could be potentially very fruitful. This thesis attempts to fill in a few of these gaps.

SECTION 2:

RPGs AND D&D

Thus far I have spoken quite a lot about role-playing games, and the game of *Dungeons and Dragons* has been mentioned. What are these games all about? How are they played? How do you win? And what is the difference between rpgs and D&D? This section will answer these questions and should provide the reader with a basic understanding of the subject.⁶ First, I will explain the general shape of the role-playing game genre, and how it differs from other game genres. Then, backing up a bit, I will adopt a historical perspective and explain how it all began with the creation of *Dungeons and Dragons* in the early 1970s. In this section I will also go into some more detail about the mechanics of the game.

ROLE PLAYING GAMES

Role-playing games are unique in the world of games, and cannot be easily compared to other types of play. They have no board or required playing pieces aside from dice⁷; they can be played anywhere; there is no winner; and they never end. The central feature of any rpg is that the players each take on the role of an imaginary persona. Then

⁶ To truly understand the rpg phenomenon, of course, one must actually play in a few games. My explanation, however, should be sufficient for the purposes of this thesis.

⁷ There are in fact some diceless rpgs as well as some that require figurines, but these lie outside of the norm and are only extreme variations of the general rpg theme.

the players collectively imagine that these personas exist within a fantasy world. The players pretend they are these other persons in this other world and interact with this setting according to its own internal logic and the rules of the particular game system that they are using. All but one of the players must take on the role of one imaginary character each, and are responsible for their character's actions within their communal world.

The type of character that any given player develops is based on the desires of that play, limited by the game system. Different game systems allow different methods of character generation, and require you to keep track of different statistics which represent your character. In all game systems, however, the players must imagine what their characters look like and how they think. Often players will develop detailed histories for their characters so that they will start the game with a wealth of past information to work with. During the game the player must try and envision this character within the fantasy world and will determine his or her actions based on the invented nature of the persona.

The Game Master

The remaining player takes on a meta-role and is responsible for creating and describing the fantasy world -- populated with other imaginary characters, flora, fauna, and any other features that this player introduces. This world

can be as simple or detailed as one's imagination and time dictate. It could be as simple as a small unnamed village surrounded by a dark forest. The characters could be villagers who need to cross the forest. They might encounter any number of imaginary obstacles on their journey, which would constitute the body of the game, or the "adventure."

Or, the world could contain countless civilizations on multiple continents, each with its own distinct culture and history, together forming something nearly as complex as our own world. The characters in this setting might be diplomats travelling from one kingdom to another, or merchants trying to break into a new market, or sea captains sailing across uncharted seas. There is no theoretical limit to the potential variations.

The "meta-player" is usually known as the game master, referee, or dungeon master (in *Dungeons and Dragons*). These terms are broad, and indicate the complex role that this player must play within the game. The game master (or GM) is responsible for describing the setting to the other players, with its varied texture of sights, sounds, and smells. The GM must, therefore, translate his or her own fantasy vision into language that evokes similar imagery for the other players. The GM's ability effectively to describe his or her fantasy world is essential for a game where

everyone is struggling to picture themselves as someone else somewhere else.

The essentially verbal nature of the game is hard to overemphasize. In reality the players are likely to be grouped around a messy table covered with sheets of paper, pizza boxes, and ash trays. The players rarely (if at all) physically "act" out their actions. Rather, they state what they are doing in the imaginary world, and the other players and GM respond based on these statements. All of the beauty, ugliness, safety, or danger of the fantasy setting must be conveyed verbally by the participants.

The GM also describes how the setting reacts to the actions of the other players (in their guise as *characters* within the setting) and must take on the role of any other imaginary individuals that the players encounter and interact with. Thus in any given game the GM might become an innkeeper, a merchant, a friendly hermit, and an evil sorcerer. In each of these roles the GM will converse with the other players (as their imaginary selves).

The innkeeper might be a sleepy old man who mumbles unintelligibly as he leads the characters to their rooms. Likewise the merchant might really be a spy for the evil wizard. The GM must play each of these personas as a distinct individual, knowing what information they possess and what their own motivations and loyalties are. The players then interact with these individuals in whatever

manner seems best to them (based on their own invented motivations and personalities). They could ignore the sleepy innkeeper or they might threaten him and demand information concerning the whereabouts of the sage. In either case, the GM must react in an appropriate manner.

Finally, the GM's is responsible for enforcing both the rules of the game and for staying true to the internal logic of the fantasy reality. Both of these final responsibilities also act as powerful limitations on the GM's influence over the course of the game. The individuals that the players encounter during their imaginary journey must obey the same rules that they must obey. The innkeeper cannot vanish into thin air with no explanation (unless such an ability is common among innkeepers in the fantasy reality). Upon such an occurrence, the characters are likely to suspect he is really a sorcerer, and will react appropriately.

Beginning, Ending, and Winning

From this broad description it can be seen how role-playing games differ from other games. They are really collective fantasies, or stories, being verbally acted out by the players. The course of the story can never be fully predicted since it fully depends upon the actions of the participants. Moreover, there can never be a "winner" since the players are not necessarily competing with each other. Their fantasy selves, of course, might compete -- with each

other or with the GM's fantasy characters -- but this competition is within the context of the game itself and it is the *characters* who win or lose, not the players. Likewise, although the GM often takes on the roles of various antagonists to the characters, he or she must also play their allies and other folk who may have no interest in the characters at all (the sleepy innkeeper, for example).⁸

As there is no winner in an rpg, there is also no definite beginning or end. The actual playing of the game, of course, begins and ends (if only for sleep and meals) but during these intervening periods time stops in the fantasy world, resuming when play continues. The players and the GM collectively decide at what point in their character's lives they wish to begin their first game. Within the context of the fantasy world, of course, the characters already have a history of their own. Likewise, the group might become bored with a storyline and thus end it, but there is nothing within the game itself that requires such a closure.

Even the death of a character does not necessitate the end of the storyline. Usually the player will create a new fantasy persona, to re-enter the story during the following game. Thus if Borg the Barbarian is slain in a battle with a wild boar, the player can create a new persona to replace Borg. During the next game, the group may encounter Morp

⁸ It is a common misconception about rpgs that the game master is pitted against the players -- creating ever more deadly situations which the players have to worm out of. This type of play does occasionally occur, but it must invariably lead to the eventual demise of the characters.

the Mercenary who is looking for work. Both Borg and Morp are played by the same person, but within the fantasy world they are distinct individuals and the player will give them different histories and personalities to reflect this.

GAME SYSTEMS

These are the basic characteristics of the role-playing game genre. In all rpgs, the players take on the roles of imaginary characters, and a game master guides them through a fantasy world. Within this general framework, however, there exist a vast array of actual game systems to choose from. There are two primary components to every game system: the method of simulation, and the type of setting, or milieu, to be simulated.

Structure and Simulation

The method of simulation comprises the rules and structure of the game system. With the general description of role-playing games in mind, one might wonder why they require a cumbersome set of rules at all. Why not simply flow with the storyline and collectively make decisions on how best to resolve conflicts? Such a group storytelling experience, although potentially interesting, bears little resemblance to role-playing games and would appeal to a much smaller population.

If a player could create his or her character from scratch, with no rules or limitations of any sort, he or she

would most likely create an unrealistically powerful figure: strong, intelligent, beautiful, etc. If all the players did this, you would have a group of superhumans who could probably overcome any obstacle in their path -- in short, a very unrealistic game. Moreover, when these characters encountered an obstacle, there would be two ways of dealing with it. Either the GM would decide what happens, or the group as a whole could decide. In either case, there is a great deal of room for disagreement, favoritism, and arbitrary results based on social pressures (i.e. the geek's character dies, while the stud's character gets all the gold...) Such a system could work with certain groups of people, but would not appeal to the general population.

So, the game requires rules to standardize procedures, and to lend an air of objectivity to the results. Each system provides its own unique method of character generation, character advancement, and combat resolution (to name but a few categories). Thus the tomes of rules and dice come into play -- how does one compress a human being onto a sheet of paper? The rules attempt to reduce the unpredictable complexities of our world into a structured format which can be used to simulate our reality effectively. The dice, likewise, become a central feature of the game and are consulted to determine a great many of the decisions.

The strengths and weaknesses of a given character, for example, are usually determined with dice. Different systems allow the players different amounts of leeway to customize these to their liking. The dice determine whether or not a character hits his or her enemy in a combat situation. They then determine what effect this hit has on the enemy. Finally, they are often used to aid the GM in making various arbitrary decisions -- will they find the secret passage? Will they notice the innkeeper's tattoo? Can the warrior force the door open? All of these decisions can be made with the aid of dice, and perhaps some charts which allow for character variation (a stronger warrior, for example, might have an easier chance of opening the door).⁹

Milieu

The second major component of all role-playing game systems is the milieu it is designed for. Some systems are specifically designed around a very specific fantasy setting -- the King Arthur period for example. Others are much broader in scope, but are usually limited to a general technological level, such as that of medieval Europe. Although the systems based around swords and sorcery have been most popular, there are also numerous games based on colonizing other planets in the far future, surviving on Earth after a nuclear war, or many others.

⁹ I will go into more detail about the mechanics of *Dungeons and Dragons* in the next section of the thesis. For now the reader should be aware that many varied game systems do exist.

In terms of game design, it is very helpful to have the system based around a particular setting and technology. Otherwise, there would need to be rules to cover everything from swords and spells to laser guns and radiation poisoning. Instead, game systems will focus on the particular aspects which apply to the settings they are designed for.¹⁰

In the end, of course, the game system is not the primary factor concerning how a game is played. The desires and style of the participants is far more important. The game system becomes the backdrop to the play-style of the actors within the game. Some games are brutally violent, others are centered on the dice and almost have a gambler's suspense; still others are almost entirely focused on long role-played conversations with little or no action. These types of distinctions are made by the players in the group, not by the game system itself.

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS

The genre of role-playing games, I have argued, is distinct from other game genres. It is also relatively new, which is striking when one considers the fact that rpgs need no special technology, requiring only people and dice (which have existed for a long time). The genre did not, however,

¹⁰ There has been at least one attempt to create a truly generic role-playing system, known as GURPS (Generic Universal Role-Playing System). The basic GURPS set provides the player with the basic structures of the game. The player must then go out and buy separate source-books for any given temporo-cultural setting, thus there are books on magic, space-faring, etc. The end result, is therefore not much different than simply buying separate games.

appear out of nowhere, but grew out of more traditional game forms. The evolution of role-playing games is particularly interesting because they exemplify the process of combining existing forms to create something wholly and radically different. The first true role-playing game was *Dungeons and Dragons*. This section will describe its origins.

War Games

War games are the direct ancestor of *Dungeons and Dragons*, and thus role-playing games. War games have had a long history, claiming chess and wei-ch'i ("go") among their more distinguished descendants. The modern form, however,

can be traced to the 1780s in the German duchy of Brunswick, where the master of pages developed a game that he named War Chess. This game was revised in 1811 as *Kriegspiel* (the War Game) by Herr von Reisswitz and his son, a Prussian artillery officer. Their game, played on a sand table that simulated a hypothetical, though feasible, terrain, helped to train Prussian officers. The game required an umpire who, after secretly receiving the decisions of the opposing military commanders, would determine the outcome of that encounter. Dice were introduced later to simulate chance factors associated with military encounters. (Fine 1983:8-9)

During the sixties and early seventies war games became increasingly popular.¹¹ Some of them were board games, while others used the traditional tabletop miniatures. A large variety of rules were created and debated by enthusiasts of this pastime to help resolve battles in a consistent and realistic manner. These games can be highly structured and complex to play. They are also often focused

¹¹ The Avalon-Hill Game Company, for example, was formed in the late 1950s by a single individual who created a military board game called *Gettysburg*. This game was very popular, "and by 1962 Avalon-Hill was the fourth largest producer of adult board games" (Fine 1983:9).

on historical reenactments, playing out historically accurate military dilemmas in different manners. An important consideration to note is that "one does not act as oneself in the game" (Fine 1983:10, italics in original). Rather the players identify with a certain side of the conflict, whether an army or a nation. The players are not, therefore, within the action, but rather control it from above -- leaders only in an abstract sense.

Eventually the International Federation of Wargaming formed to allow war game devotees to interact and play with others with similar interests. Soon various special interest groups developed beneath the umbrella organization. One of these groups, the "Castle & Crusade Society," was created by E. Gary Gygax in the early seventies: "All members of this sub-group were interested in things medieval" (Gygax 1985:27). Gygax began publishing a magazine, the "Domesday Book," in which he published a map of a kingdom for use by the society: "Members of the society could then establish their holdings on the map, and we planned to sponsor campaign-type gaming at some point" (Gygax 1985:27).

The kingdom which Gygax created was wholly original, an imaginary landscape where numerous barons, dukes, and rebels could locate their forces. This development, seemingly innocuous enough, set the stage for the transformation into a true role-playing game. Each player, of course,

identified with his army or barony, and would play the same group every time. Thus the kingdom began to develop a history, with each player vying with the others for power and military supremacy.

Gygax and other C&C members began to create and modify the rules for this setting of theirs. Gygax had acquired some new miniatures, many of which "were so heroic looking that it seemed a good idea to play some games which would reflect the action of the great swords and sorcery yarns" (Gygax 1985:27). Gygax is referring to a genre of heroic pulp fantasy characterized by Robert Howard ("Conan"), Fritz Leiber ("Fafhrd & the Gray Mouser"), and Jack Vance among others (Gygax 1979:224). Gygax began developing rules for magical spells, combat with mythical monsters, etc. This system soon evolved into games where instead of running an entire army, the player would create a character -- warrior, wizard, priest, or rogue -- who would then battle fearsome monsters and other characters. This new game system was set within the already existing kingdom, and *Dungeons and Dragons* was born.

Original D&D

The original conception of *D&D* was relatively simple. The player would create a character based on a number of statistics: strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, constitution, and charisma. These abilities were generated

randomly with dice and the player would choose a profession, or "class" of character based on them.

Each type of character was carefully balanced against the others so that each had its own strengths and weaknesses. Warriors required strength and constitution to wield their heavy weapons and were very powerful in hand-to-hand combat. Wizards needed to be intelligent to understand their complex spells, but were limited to a simple staff or dagger in combat. Priests were wise and could gain magic through prayer and religious contemplation; they were able to use a medium range of weapons. Rogues (or thieves) were dexterous, but not particularly strong, and had a host of special skills such as picking locks and disarming traps. Each character would also have a number of "hit points" which would define how much damage they could take before being killed. Finally, as the characters defeated their foes they would slowly grow more powerful, gaining new spells, abilities, legendary weapons, and earning extra hit points.

The new game was an instant success in the C&C Society, and it evolved rapidly as it was play-tested by various groups. The concept of players working together against common foes was developed, and so one player was designated as the "dungeon master" or DM who would create adventures for the heros to participate in. *D&D* adventures were usually based around dungeons, or mazes, populated with evil

beasts guarding treasures of gold and magic (glowing swords, enchanted wands, crystal balls, etc.) The point of the game was simply to defeat the monsters and accumulate treasure. The DM would create these mazes on graph paper, making them progressively more difficult and complex as the characters grew more powerful.

Within a brief period of time, *Dungeons and Dragons* left the bounds of the war gaming community, and took off nationally as a popular new game. TSR (Tactical Studies Rules), a company Gygax and a friend had started, quickly grew into a major enterprise. By the late seventies, *D&D* had reached a sufficiently large audience to demand a revised edition. The old rules were chaotic and unclear, requiring a great deal of revision to fit together into an internally consistent system.

The new edition was called *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* and quickly replaced its predecessor.¹² The new advanced game was published in the form of the hardcover rule books that are now so commonly associated with role-playing games. The new game greatly clarified the older system and also provided many new rules. Furthermore, it greatly expanded the magic system and provided an entire tome of monsters for characters to deal with.

¹² To this day there is some confusion between "D&D" and "Advanced D&D." AD&D has become the standard, and it is what most people refer to when they say "D&D." There is however, still a basic game on the market, meant as a simpler version of the game for beginners. Unless I specify otherwise, I am henceforth using "D&D" to refer to *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*.

Other RPGs Take Off

The great success of *Dungeons and Dragons* prompted others to develop similar systems, either as improvements upon *D&D* or as systems developed for different settings. During the course of the eighties, literally dozens of new rpgs flooded the market, filling every conceivable niche. Some took off, others vanished relatively quickly. These new games developed in diverse directions, often veering away from the conventions of *D&D*.

Some systems moved back toward their war gaming origins, with *Car Wars* and *Battletech* being examples of popular games where the main objective is to build ever more powerful death machines to pit against your opponents. These types of games are only called role-playing games because they came after *D&D* and have a similar format in terms of dice, charts, and combat rules.

The majority of new rpgs, however, moved farther and farther away from war games. The setting and style of the game became more important than the combat-system. *Traveller* and *Star Frontiers* allow the players to explore the limits of out space in ships of their own design. In *Champions* the players take on roles of comic book superheroes. In *Top Secret* one becomes an international spy, infiltrating foreign governments only to betray them (at great risk). *Middle Earth Role Playing (MERP)* transforms Tolkien's epic world into a game world, where

characters can explore the mines of Moria, fight against Smaug the dragon, or even join the forces of Gondor in wars against Sauron in Mordor. An infinite array of medieval-style games have also been created (such as RuneQuest and Pendragon), which appeal to those who like the *D&D* idea, but find its rule system to be irksome.

Later Development of D&D

As the eighties progressed, *D&D* became but one of many role-playing game systems. As the role-playing game genre veered away from war gaming, *Dungeons and Dragons* followed suit. Mazes and monsters were a thing of the past. TSR, now a large corporation, produced "The World of Greyhawk" and other massive gaming worlds for *D&D* fans. These pre-packaged worlds consisted of wall-sized maps, and booklets describing the history and development of the cultures represented on the maps. These worlds provided a starting point for many novice game masters who did not have the time (or inclination) to create their own worlds from scratch.

As the decade drew to a close, TSR put out a second edition of the *AD&D* game. This second edition put much greater emphasis on the role-playing aspects of the game, rather than on the old "hack-n-slash" adventure style. New charts and tables were produced to aid character development. Players could select from vast catalogs of skills, or "proficiencies," to flesh out their characters. These skills ranged from typical "adventure" skills like

sword use to things like brewing and herbalism. Characters under the new system could achieve a depth never possible before.

D&D has not failed to adapt itself to multi-culturalism and other modern trends. "Oriental Adventures" is a *D&D* rules system meant to recreate Asian themes. Instead of warriors and wizards, one has ninjas and samurais. Other packages have come out based around mesoamerican, Arabian, Indian, and other settings. These packages are naturally extremely stereotypical and have little validity as historical models. *D&D* is more aimed at catching the spirit and feel of a setting than at any sort of historical (or cultural) realism. Individual gaming groups, of course, are free to modify these settings to suit their needs.¹³

The modern form of *D&D* along with other role-playing games focuses on the fantasy aspects of gaming. Its war gaming roots are all but a vague memory. There are, however, still some "survivals" from its origins. The military term "campaign" is used in almost all role-playing games to represent an ongoing game. A campaign consists of a collection of adventures and game sessions over a long period of time, generally focused on a single group of characters. A campaign may or may not have anything to do

¹³ I have, for example, been engaged for the past few years in creating a setting based around the themes present in the *Arabian Nights*. I often use TSR products as a well-spring of ideas, but rarely stick to their ridiculous notions of how Bedouin society structured itself.

with war, depending on the events that have occurred during its existence.

Few in the gaming industry have any predictions for the future of role-playing games. Everyone agrees that they will continue to flourish, but what they might evolve into is unknown. Some speculate that as computers become more powerful, a lot of the mechanical aspects of the game structure can be computerized, thus freeing the game master and players to focus even more intently upon the creative/fantasy aspects of the game. It will be interesting to watch this genre adapt itself to the desires of future gamers.

CHAPTER 2:

FUN IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

D&D and other role-playing games are a lot of work. At its simplest level, *D&D* takes a long time to learn. The creation of a basic character (with no frills) usually takes at least two hours. In a more complex campaign, where the fantasy world's history and the character's history need to be carefully intertwined, the process may take days.¹⁴ After all of this, the player must learn the rule structure of the game itself. Even just picking up the basic mechanics can take a long time for someone who has never played before. Finally, the player must enter the GM's fantasy world and learn its rules.

Players are responsible for their characters' knowledge, so they usually compile page after page covered with names of innkeepers, kings, allies, and villains; maps of towns, kingdoms, and dungeons; magic words; notes on how to open secret doors; etc. Students who rarely (if ever)

¹⁴ In the games I have run at Oberlin, we try to begin character creation about 2-4 weeks before the character will be introduced. This allows us enough time to put together a full-fledged history for the character, so that the player can really know him or her well.

lift a pen in class will write pages of notes during a game. For game masters, the work load can be even more arduous:

Through the process of world-creation during my fifteen years of gaming, I have ended up researching some of the strangest subjects . . . I've studied topics as diverse as metallurgy, mythology, philosophy, religion, and quantum physics (don't ask). . . . And all those of you who first encountered calculus while figuring out travel times in the first edition of Traveller, think about when you first took a calculus class and were struck with a strange sense of familiarity.¹⁵ (e-mail questionnaire)

Clearly role-playing games require a significant investment of time and effort. What are the rewards of this investment? Why do so much "work" in order to play? These are the central questions that will be addressed in this chapter. Since there is no research done on this topic, the collection of data poses quite a dilemma to the researcher. Rather than beginning with some theory of fun, I have chosen to start with the gamers themselves. In the first section of this chapter I will allow gamers to speak for themselves about what is *fun* about role-playing games. In the second half of the chapter, I will present a theoretical model which fits the data.

¹⁵ I can corroborate this type of claim with my own experience. A few years ago, a friend and I spent our summer in the campus library researching ancient Arabian poetry and music in order to create a realistic Arabian minstrel type of character. Similarly, last summer I researched the history of the history of dyes and the dye trade in order to present this more realistically within my "world."

SECTION 1:

THE "NATIVE" PERSPECTIVE

My data for this section are based primarily upon a collection of electronic-mail (e-mail) responses to a questionnaire I sent out. These data are supplemented by interviews (both personal and electronic) with friends and other gamers, and by my own experience. I sent out a questionnaire over the "internet" in early April asking the question, "What makes rpgs fun for you?" I distributed this question to three e-mail rpg discussion groups, thus reaching in excess of 1300 gamers in approximately 40 countries. The response was beyond my expectations, and my own e-mail account was immediately flooded with lengthy responses (most over a page long). The bulk of my data are from this source.

It is important to note that this questionnaire was in no way designed to provide comprehensive statistics analysis on the subject. I have not used a random sampling technique, and most of the responses are probably from avid gamers who have strong feelings concerning their pastime. My goal is simply to characterize some of the broad rationales provided by enthusiasts of the rpg genre. Notwithstanding this caveat, the responses are often very similar and seem to fall naturally into a few distinct categories. These patterns are particularly significant

because the respondents are widely separated geographically and culturally.

In addition to these e-mail responses, I have also conducted personal interviews with a number of gamers, friends and other gaming acquaintances. Most of these interviews were live, but a few were conducted by e-mail. These responses are, for the most part, comparable to the questionnaire responses. I also occasionally call upon my own experiences to provide added examples or some interpretive insight.

The reader should be aware that the style of e-mail writing can be significantly different from that of standard prose or spoken English. Conventions of capitalization and grammar are particularly prone to distortion. Such peculiarities merely reflect the emerging textual style of the virtual community and should not be construed to reflect any lack of linguistic ability on the part of the authors. I have included the quotes as written to reflect this distinctiveness.

The responses naturally divide into two relatively distinct categories: players and game masters. The informants are generally agreed that there is a difference between the two roles, and that one gets different types of enjoyment from them. I will therefore use this distinction as a way of dividing up this section. I will begin with the player responses, since they are the larger set.

PLAYERS

For the majority of my respondents, the "fun" of role-playing games is inherent in the act of imagining oneself in a fantasy reality. It is an act of escape into an alternative reality, where one can perform heroic (or dastardly) deeds:

As a player I enjoy playing the role of someone else and doing glorious deeds, saving someone from disaster (even if it is only myself). I like being part of a team, solving problems and being someone I'm not with capabilities far beyond my own. (e-mail interview)

The problem-solving theme is reflected in a number of other responses:

I particularly enjoy figuring out what's going on in some kind of puzzle, mystery, etc. (e-mail questionnaire)

The fun I get is from dealing with situations, planning, taking a bold gamble, etc. (e-mail questionnaire)

These players seem to enjoy the intellectual thrill of finding solutions to problems. Problems, however, are nothing new in games. Many board games provide difficult situations for one to solve. Gamers are often asked why they prefer the complexity of rpgs to simpler sorts of games (which, like chess, can be intellectually challenging). Why not play *Clue*, which can be learned in a single sitting? The answer to this question is twofold.

First, in most games the player is outside the action, detached from the importance of the mystery's solution. In *Clue*, for example, it is a rare individual who really cares

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who killed who with the wrench. Players are interested in solving the puzzle first (in order to win), and the puzzle itself merely provides a context for competition. In rpgs, however, the player is within the action:

Instead of playing a god-like general hovering over the battlefield seeing everything and directing the lives of thousands, I get to be a soldier in the trench fighting for my life and the lives of my companions next to me. It's much more ... 'realistic'. (e-mail interview, ellipsis in original¹⁶)

Overcoming obstacles and solving puzzles becomes a much more personal affair in a role-playing game. To the player the fantasy mysteries have their own contexts and can be approached from an infinite number of angles. Whether one succeeds or fails will have ongoing repercussions. They are within "an interactive story where each player is a starring role" (questionnaire response).

A second, and related, reason why the problems and puzzles of role-playing games may provide more enjoyment than those of a board game is that these puzzles are unlimited in form. The fantasy characters can encounter the same vast array of obstacles that we might encounter in "real" life. Moreover, these obstacles are not limited by the constraints of reality -- one can encounter literally anything that one can imagine. These fantasy hurdles can be as simple as a troll guarding a bridge, or can be as complex

¹⁶ Because a number of these quotes include ellipses, I will from now on include editorial ellipses in square brackets. Ellipses without brackets are part of the quoted text.

as managing the theft of some diplomatic documents from a Sultan's palace.

This very versatility of role-playing games is the central feature for many players -- the fact that the fantasy world is unbounded:

There is little in a role-playing game that is quite as enjoyable as playing in a gaming world where you know there is more to the world than the GM is telling you. (e-mail questionnaire)

Many gamers enjoy the idea of exploring the ever-expanding reaches of the fantasy universe. The ideals of "Star Trek" come true in the game, for the characters are usually going "where no man has gone before." The carefully mapped surface of our world is left behind for an unknown world of infinite proportions. The fun lies in

that unlimited sense of freedom, and the fact that their still exists the frontier. every one dreams of exploring new worlds, when rpging, your dream gets closer to reality. (e-mail questionnaire)

For other gamers, the fun of the game lies ultimately within the arena of pretend. Rpgs are about pretending -- pretending to be someone else, somewhere else. Many players find this pretending to be the draw of the game:

I always enjoyed games of pretend, and RPGs are a way to continue that interest. (e-mail questionnaire)

It is the use of imagination to be who we are not. It is acting. A refreshing chance to be, for a while, who you are not. Also there is the wonder of things not accessible to us in the world, such as magic and monsters and an absolute scale of right and wrong. A place where the gods are interactive with people and challenges and purpose exist freely. (e-mail questionnaire)

Clearly the second respondent finds parts of the pretend world that he (all respondents were male) does not find in his "real" life. His reality is one in which "challenges and purpose" do not, apparently, exist freely. Role-playing games provide this meaning.

For the majority of players it appears that the imaginary reality of the game is the real attraction. Whether they love to explore new realms or overcome fantastic obstacles or even to simply engage in pretend, the players enjoy becoming "starring" roles in an alternate reality. This alternate reality grows and evolves, responding to the actions of the characters -- becoming an endless story where the future is always in doubt.

Role-playing games are not, however, simply fantasy documentaries or soap-operas:

Once you play, if the game interests you at all and the group is any good, you're hooked. I think it's adrenalin -- I get a rush when I play, and so do a lot of my players. Everybody knows you get addicted to such feelings. The game excites me, it excites my players, and we can kill a few hours working out frustrations or having fun exploring worlds we [. . .] couldn't find in real life because they don't exist. (e-mail questionnaire)

These game sessions can have all the excitement of a suspenseful movie or novel. Players frequently pace, mutter, or issue strings of epithets during tense situations. These episodes of tension are contrasted with the slower aspects of the game, where characters engage in

extended fantasy conversations or spend their time shopping for jewelry at the bazaar.

For the players, role-playing can be a mixture of many different types of fun. One respondent sums up these multidimensional themes quite vividly:

vicarious excitement. escapism. social interaction with others. doritos. exploring a different culture. fighting the hero wars to make a world safe from (lunars, sorcerers, chaos, whatever). bizarre non-gaming conversation tangents. being all i could be if i was a 75 pound grazelander cottar with an attitude. informal (or formal) competition with others. chewing the scenery. getting new funny stories to disrupt future game sessions with. and this is just from last night. (e-mail questionnaire)

Many of the references here are as meaningless to me as they probably are to the reader. The spirit of the quote, however, is certainly one of high adventure. Alongside of "hero wars" and competition, however, are cultural exploration and "chewing the scenery." For this player, a single gaming session can contain all of these aspects. In this respect, rpgs are similar to drama or literature, with climaxes and anti-climaxes, conflict and resolution, setting and plot. Unlike these art forms, however, in role-playing games the players become at once the actors and the audience.

GAME MASTERS

To continue with the dramatistic analogy, if the players are both actors and audience, then the game master is actor, audience, and playwright. We begin to see here,

however, the limitations of this analogy, for the GM is not in complete control of the plot. The actions of the player characters can completely alter the GM's plans.¹⁷ With this in mind, however, the GM does have a lot of creative power over the course of campaign events. The setting of the game is almost entirely based on the GM's work, as are the interactive features of the fantasy reality (other characters, obstacles, etc.)

All of the game masters who responded to my questionnaire reported that the creative aspect of the game was a major motivation:

There's a certain pleasure involved in creation. Whether you create an individual with a completely separate personality along with its history and motivations, or if you create a complete world (my personal favorite), with its nations, geography, and history. There's a pleasure in the act of creation. (e-mail questionnaire)

As a GM, [. . .] I would have to say that the attraction is an exercise in creative fantasy and imagination. I love creating worlds, settings, adventures, people. (e-mail interview)

For many GMs, this creative "pleasure" is separate from the actual playing of the game itself. The GM takes pride in his or her creation as a separate entity, even if the players can only appreciate a small portion of it:

I still find immense pleasure in world-building, and even though my players could still care less about the subtle nuances that appear in the cultures they encounter, it's the only way I could

¹⁷ I recall playing in a game once where our characters did something so unexpected (and stupid) that the DM stood up and announced that the game was suspended until he could rewrite his entire campaign!

GM with any amount of self-respect. (e-mail questionnaire)

Although this GM feels that his players could "care less" about the details of his creation, it seems that such creative pride has value within the game. Compare this quote with the player who was particularly drawn to worlds "where you know there is more to the world than the GM is telling you" (questionnaire response). If the GM takes personal pride in the internal logic of his fantasy world, it seems likely to achieve the kind of depth that this player desires.

One individual I interviewed has not actually played an rpg in years, but is still working on his fantasy world:

I now have developed a fairly elaborate world, dozens of NPC¹⁸ personalities, interesting places and objects and scenarios [. . .] I have invented alphabets, celestial cycles and constellations, mythologies, systems of music and magic and magical music...I feel as though I've built a watch, and I'm waiting for it to be wound up, to see how it runs. (e-mail interview)

This quote illustrates the intense artistic appeal of creating a fantasy world. The interviewee clearly enjoys his creation for its own sake. In this respect, game mastering can be likened to painting, composing, or writing. The form of the "art," however, is unlike any of these other forms:

So as a DM, I'd say the fun comes from creation, although it's an interactive creation process which

¹⁸ Non-player characters (NPCs) are the myriad of individuals that the game master creates and plays within the game. Any being within the fantasy world who is not run by a player is a non-player character.

makes it different from being a novelist or playwright or visual artist. (e-mail questionnaire)

A fantasy world contains many elements from more traditional art forms, but the final product is very different. The world may have a vivid history, with intricate plots and sub-plots, and it may be populated by hundreds of unique individuals. All of this, however, is designed to be a backdrop to the action of the players who become the protagonists (or antagonists) of the story. The game master creates a vast context, but leaves out the "text" itself.

The game master, in a god-like role, creates a world according to his own desires:

when dming, being able to create my own world in the image I see it. my worlds tend to reflect how I would prefer to exist. (e-mail questionnaire)

Once the game begins, however, the GM loses his or her omnipotence and must watch as the players guide events in unexpected directions. The GM still has great power over the course of events, but the players are also fully capable of molding the fantasy reality according to their own vision of how it should be.¹⁹

Within the artistic realm, a musical metaphor comes closest to the nature of an invented fantasy reality. Just as a piece of music requires the "players" in an orchestra,

¹⁹ Players can, for example, choose to ignore obstacles that the GM places before them. They can team up with the GM's planned antagonists, or refuse to help the protagonists. It is perhaps trite, but accurate nevertheless, to say that the GM can lead the players to water, but he cannot make them drink!

so the players in an rpg are needed to breathe life into the fantasy world. Their individual styles and manners of playing affect the development of the fantasy. Different themes receive different emphases according to the particular desires of the players.

This interactive process is, of course, part of the fun for most GMs:

Well, for me (since I DM most of the time now), the excitement comes when my ideas for adventures are put to the test. When the players step into my traps, or step out of them, or completely ruin my ideas, or completely fall for my ideas - this is what I love. (e-mail questionnaire)

Whether or not this GM's plans succeed or fail is of secondary consequence to the process of watching these plans interactively unfold. The fun is simply in the life of his creation. The GM enjoys the players' enjoyment of his creation.

Some GMs liken their role to that of a teacher, enjoying the process of learning. This attitude is exemplified in the following quote:

When we are actually playing I enjoy keeping secrets and revealing them slowly to the players. Watching them try to figure things out and especially the "light bulb" effect. That is the phenomenon that some teachers live for: the moment when the student "gets it." (e-mail interview)

The GM, of course, has the whole picture before him, but the players only see the portions that are revealed through game events. During the course of a game, players continually invent explanations for the events that they have

experienced. Often these explanations, based on partial data, are wrong. After a time, however, a player suddenly puts it all together and "gets it." This realization might be as simple as a strategy to defeat one's enemy, or as complex as discerning a historic relationship between two distant cultures. Watching the players slowly learn about the fantasy world is very fulfilling for the game master.²⁰

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

The players's responses reflected a broad range of qualities that they found enjoyable about role-playing games. From this array, however, there were some clear trends. Most players are drawn to the imaginatory potential of the fantasy world. Some love the nature of pretend-play, and desire to explore alien and ever-expanding worlds. Others enjoy performing deeds that are impossible in "real life." Another group of players enjoy the problem-solving aspect of the game, desiring to confront and overcome (if possible) an endless variety of obstacles. All find the game to be a grand escape from the present realities of their lives, leading to imaginary realms where one's real problems are meaningless.

For game masters the enjoyment of the game is centrally related to their creative role. Some game masters seem to

²⁰ Occasionally this process can be inverted. I ran a game once where the players came up with an explanation for game events that was far superior (in terms of logic and believability) to the "official" explanation that I had originally created. Without their knowledge, I promptly rewrote my campaign notes to reflect their interpretation. Thus the players unconsciously rewrote the "script" in the process of acting it out.

enjoy the process of creation even more than they enjoy playing it out. Most, however, find their maximum enjoyment from the interactive nature of the creation -- when it comes to life. The theme of escape is present here as well, since one must enter a fantasy world in order to create it.

SECTION 2:

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

After viewing all of these responses, one has a better understanding of how players interpret their experiences. One can even impose a structure of categories upon their responses, highlighting patterns of perception. Finally, one can draw conclusions from these patterns -- such as "escape" being a primary fun-producing aspect of role-playing games.

None of this, however, provides one with a theoretical explanation of why people enjoy the complexity of role-playing games. Most lay-people on the street would not be surprised to hear that *Dungeons and Dragons* is an escape from reality -- indeed, this is a common criticism of the game. Furthermore, there are much simpler ways to "escape," if that is all one desires. Television, for example, provides 24 hours of nonstop, effortless escape.

The player responses do not, in and of themselves, provide one with a generalized understanding of the "fun" in

role-playing games. These data can, however, provide a foundation for a more useful theoretical explanation.

THE PLAY/WORK DICHOTOMY

While examining the stacks of questionnaire responses and interviews that I have collected, I encountered two quotes which suggested a new angle from which to perceive the role-playing game phenomenon. I began my search for the "fun" of role-playing games by suggesting that they seemed to require too much work to be fun. One respondent pointed out that this attitude was naive:

many forms of recreation take a lot of work. [. . .] case in point -- i left last night's gaming session in the middle, drove fifteen minutes climbing into hideously expensive evil-smelling, damp and ice-cold equipment and fifteen minutes climbing OUT of evil-smelling soaking wet equipment in a fetid change room too small to hold the fifteen guys in it and then drove back to the game session all so that i could play hockey (badly!) for 45 minutes. (e-mail questionnaire)

This player has pointed out the obvious -- that effort does not preclude fun. A second player took this line of reasoning a step further:

They are fun because it is so much work. Ever hear the old adage the more you put into it the more you get out of it. Players can toss themselves into the game fully because they have taken the time to understand their character and his or her goals. They in fact have created the goals and background. (Stephanie, personal communication)

Stephanie claims that the work is essential to the enjoyment of the game. From this standpoint, then, one appears to earn the pleasure derived from role-playing games.

The combination of earned pleasure with the idea of "escape" reminded me of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work:

Beyond Boredom and Anxiety (1975). In this book, Csikszentmihalyi examines chess, rock climbing, and professional rock dancing as three leisure activities that are "fun" but involve a great deal of work. He introduces the concept of "flow" as a way of explaining the enjoyment of challenging or even life-threatening activities.

Victor Turner takes up Csikszentmihalyi's ideas in his article "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play Flow, and Ritual" (1974). Turner argues that flow also works as an explanation of certain types of liminal experiences, i.e. flow occurs in cultural gaps. In 1990, Csikszentmihalyi published *Flow*, which further refined his theory. The theory of flow provides a complex yet intuitive explanation for many types of play and leisure. In the remainder of this chapter, I will describe the flow theory and present it as a plausible theoretical explanation for the enjoyment of role-playing games.

Flow

Csikszentmihalyi was initially struck by the peculiar fact that extremely different forms of enjoyment were described in very similar ways:

Apparently the way a long-distance swimmer felt when crossing the English Channel was almost identical to the way a chess player felt during a tournament or a climber progressing up a difficult rock face. (1990:48)

From these similar descriptions, Csikszentmihalyi developed the concept of "flow," based on a term commonly used by informants to describe their experiences:

In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present or future. (1975:36)

This broad description is meant to include many activities other than play and games. Csikszentmihalyi finds such a feeling in most pleasurable activities, and even in some activities outside of the leisure sphere.

In terms of games in particular, Csikszentmihalyi describes flow in the following terms:

For the duration of the event, players and spectators cease to act in terms of common sense and concentrate instead on the peculiar reality of the game. (1990:72)

By removing the word "spectators" from this sentence, it could be an accurate description of a role-playing game. I will argue below that the fun in role-playing games can be explained in terms of flow.

FLOW IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Csikszentmihalyi breaks the flow experience down into eight basic components, most (but not necessarily all) of which are part of flow-producing activities:

- *sense of challenge* -- the activity involves some skill (or skills) to complete

- *concentration* -- one must focus (concentrate) on the activity
- *clarity of goals* -- the activity usually has distinct goals
- *immediate feedback* -- one receives clear feedback concerning the achievement of one's goals
- *deep involvement* -- the concerns of daily life are replaced with the more immediate concerns of the all-consuming activity
- *sense of control* -- one feels a sense of control over one's actions
- *reduction of self-consciousness* -- one loses the sense of self which usually guides activities, yet this sense of self is strengthened by the flow experience
- *distorted sense of time* -- one loses track of time while caught up in the intensity of the activity

The remainder of this chapter delineates the relationship between each of these categories and the experience of role-playing gamers. In most of the following subsections, I will discuss players and game masters separately. Their roles in rpgs differ enough to require different explanations.

Sense of Challenge

The activities which are best suited to provide ongoing flow are those that are consistently challenging.

Activities which are too difficult or too easy produce either anxiety or boredom. Ideally, the level of challenge should mold itself to the abilities of the participants. Players, therefore, enjoy games where they are matched with a relatively equal opponent. If an opponent is too difficult or too easy, the game becomes either frustrating or boring.

Role-playing games have this feature built into their very nature. The role of the game master is inherently challenging. The GM must maintain a delicate balance between the level of challenge and the logic of the fantasy. The game master is expected to provide obstacles for the players that are difficult but not impossible to overcome. If one does not achieve this, then one must modify the level of challenge accordingly. Ideally this modification should be so subtle that the players cannot detect it, for in detecting it the reality of the illusion is pierced.

This subtlety is very difficult to achieve. Let us imagine that a GM has created an adventure where the characters are expected to sneak past some elite guards. The GM, however, misjudged the skills of his or her players, and they instantly set off the alarm. The GM could simply have them all beheaded, thus ending the game (but preserving the integrity of the fantasy). More often the GM will attempt to remedy his error by saving them. If the "elite" guards suddenly become incompetent, the players will

instantly realize they are being saved. Belief in the fantasy is no longer maintained because they know that "in reality" the guards would have caught them. The GM must, therefore, spontaneously create some plausible event that effectively saves the characters without alerting them to its artificial function.

The level of challenge for the game master is also infinitely variable, since the fantasy reality can become infinitely complex. The more complex it is, the more difficult it is to present it effectively.

For the players, of course, the game is also challenging, both in the act of playing and in the *content* of the play. Players are constantly striving to picture the fantasy reality that the GM is describing. And, of course, within the game they are faced with the obstacles that the GM has created. Players furthermore have some power over the type and level of challenge that they face. Players who wish to be strategically challenged are likely to send their characters to the battlefield. Other players may prefer the challenge of a mystery or a diplomatic mission. These choices are usually based on the types of skills that the players wish to exercise during the game.

Concentration

Csikszentmihalyi claims that "when all a person's skills are needed to cope with the challenges of a situation, that person's attention is completely absorbed by

the activity" (1990:53). A rock climber, for example, is completely focused on the task at hand. This type of focus allows for spontaneous action, closing the gap between one's self and one's actions. This effect is clearly seen in the process of learning to play a musical instrument -- ideally one does not think about one's fingers and such, but just *plays* the music. This type of focus is very important during role-playing games. New players usually preface their characters' statements in some manner: "I say to the guard that I want him to open the gate" or "I ask the astrologer about the prophecy." Such statements are always met with cries of "Don't say 'I say,' just SAY it!" This is very difficult for beginners to grasp. After they have had some experience playing, however, they understand the importance of this distinction.

During the game, players seek to dispel the reality around them and enter into another reality. Ideally the rules of the simulation should be in the background, providing a framework for the fantasy.²¹ A major difference between a role-playing game and a board game is that the players are *players* in a board game, but in an rpg they are primarily *characters*. In a role-playing game one seeks to become one's character. When one talks of one's

²¹ One player I interviewed stated it quite simply: "What makes them not fun is when the rules impinge upon the fantasy" (e-mail interview).

character in the third person, one remains in the role of a player, directing the character's actions from a distance.

In order for the collective fantasy to work, all the players must "be" their characters. If even one of them steps out of character, the rest are immediately yanked out of the illusion as well. Conversely, when everyone is "in character," the fantasy is reinforced for all the participants. Within the bounds of this communal fantasy, one no longer considers what one's character might do. The character and the player have merged, and the player states what he (the player/character) is doing. This phenomenon, of course, is nothing new -- actors strive to achieve such an effect every time they step on stage.

The game master, of course, rarely plays a single role for long, so his or her concentration is somewhat different from that of a player. He or she is more actively a "player" (in the traditional sense) than a character, having to retain the "overhead" view of the game. Because of the complexity of the simulation, however, this role is of such an intensity as to invariably require total concentration. The game master must be prepared to deal with an infinite number of unexpected (and unpredictable) events within the game. The logic of the fantasy reality must, therefore, be internalized to such an extent that the game master can respond to situations spontaneously. This intimate connection allows the game master (and the world he

presents/represents) to "flow" with the action, surrounding the players with a constantly maintained illusion.

Clarity of Goals

Flow usually occurs in activities which have well-defined goals. In most games, these goals are clear -- in basketball one must throw the ball through the hoop, in poker one must try to develop the strongest hand, etc. Such clear goals allow one to focus on the process of the activity, applying one's skills to overcome challenges (such as opponents). In most games, the goal is static, but the process of achieving the goal is variable. The fun of the game lies in developing the most efficient strategy for achieving one's goal.

In role-playing games, however, there is not such a simple goal-structure; the creation of goals is part of the play experience (for the players). Role-playing games simply add goal selection as a second dimension of play. One must first select goals and then select strategies to achieve the goals. These dynamic goals, however, are just as compelling as the static goals of other games.

Once the player (or character) has a goal, he or she will often pursue it single-mindedly. Often one looks forward to a game in order to achieve the goals one set in a previous setting. Once a campaign has been played for an extended period of time, there is usually a web of interrelated goals at work for the characters. They have

long-term group and personal goals, as well as short-term goals. Some goals are considered central to the game, such as solving a quest or discovering some vital piece of information. Others may be peripheral, such as stopping off to visit an ally from past adventures. This fabric of goals provides a depth to the game that is rare in other games.²² It also explains the lack of a defined "end-point," since the goals form an overlapping (and thus continuous) flow -- in the process of achieving one goal, the player develops other goals eventually replace it.

Like the players, the game master can have many overlapping goals within a game. A major difference, however, is that the game master always has a fixed primary goal -- to provide an enjoyable experience for the players. The GM is held responsible for the "fun" of the game, and if it proves to be boring, he or she has failed. Any other goals (such as presenting a new adventure or quirky character) are subsidiary to this primary goal.

Immediate Feedback

A result of distinct goals in most flow activities is an immediate sense of whether one is accomplishing one's goal. In the case of a rock-climber, whose goal is to reach the top without falling, "every second, hour after hour, he

²² One might imagine, however, that a professional basketball player may have a similarly complex set of goals. He may wish to work on a certain type of shot, or on speeding up his dribble, etc. The central goal, being a defining feature of basketball, never varies.

receives information that he is meeting that basic goal" (Csikszent-mihalyi 1990:54). The same type of thing applies to most sports and many leisure activities.

In role-playing games, only the game master receives such an instant response. It is not difficult to tell if the players are enjoying the game. If they are absorbed in their character roles, the game master is successfully meeting his or her primary goal. On the other hand, if the players are bored and constantly talk about other events, the game master knows that the game is not engrossing.

The players must be a bit more patient in receiving their feedback. They do, however, receive this information much faster than one would in real life. A goal in our standard life might take years to achieve, whereas in the game it might be accomplished in only one sitting. Furthermore, extraneous "mundane" details are absent from the game. One does not have to play out every meal, every conversation, or even every day of a character's life. It is permissible, in fact, to skip large amounts of time -- as long as such time is not central to the accomplishment of a goal. It is, therefore, permissible to say, "ok, three months pass, and you pull into the harbor." The game master would never, however, say "ok, you engage the dragon in a heroic battle and are eventually victorious..."

Deep Involvement

In order for flow to occur, one must leave behind the cares and worries of daily life. Such psychic baggage only serves to distract one from the goals and experiences of the flow activity. One does not generally play one's best match of tennis while worrying about problems in the home or the office. The previously mentioned features of flow are, of course, designed to aid in this departure from reality. By focusing all of one's concentration on clear goals, one leaves little room for extraneous concerns.

Csikszentmihalyi quotes a mountaineer who experiences this type of flow while climbing:

you're not aware of other problematic life situations. It becomes a world unto its own, significant only to itself. It's a concentration thing. Once you're into the situation, it's incredibly real, and you're very much in charge of it. It becomes your total world. (1990:58-59)

This could as easily be a description of a role-playing game. We can see here a direct connection with the "escape" theme so prominent in rpgs. When a player is enmeshed in the fantasy world, his or her problems are replaced by fantasy problems -- the stress of an unfinished paper is transformed into a quest to kill a dragon. This is yet another reason why focused concentration and playing "in character" is so essential to the game. When one is pulled

from the fantasy world, the stress of daily life often returns with a vengeance.²³

Role-playing games differ from other forms of play in that the fantasy reality attempts to be as "real" as our standard reality. Within its own parameters, the fantasy world is internally consistent and it is populated by "real" people. In this respect, rpgs are closer to mountain climbing than chess. If a mountain climber screws up, he or she could die. In an rpg, if one's character screws up, he or she could likewise die or cause the death of innocent victims. When one is fully wrapped up in the fantasy, this can cause a great deal of anguish.²⁴

Unlike rock climbing, however, role-playing games are not truly life-threatening. There are, in fact, mechanisms to deal with the intensity when it becomes disconcertingly "real." A player quoted earlier mentioned "getting new funny stories to disrupt future game sessions with." Telling comical stories from past games naturally "disrupts" the fantasy (unless told from the character's perspective).

²³ Conversely, sometimes after a game one's problems seem much more manageable. I have often experienced a renewed sense of perspective through an extended role-playing session. I recall playing a game shortly after my bike was stolen. Prior to the game, I was extremely stressed out about the missing bike. After engaging in a quest to stop the evil slave traders in the Amedio Jungle, however, the "evil" bike thieves seemed petty.

²⁴ During a recent game I observed this happen to one of the players (Jen). Jen's character was accosted by thugs in a bazaar. Her character is very headstrong, and decided to teach the thugs a lesson. The thugs quickly realized that they were no match for her, and ran off. She threw a dagger after one of them, but missed. After some deliberation (checking rules for where objects go if they miss their mark) the GM ruled that the dagger hit one of the merchants, killing him. To further compound the situation, after looking at the map it was determined that this merchant was one that the group had had many dealings with. The player was mortified by her actions, and refuses to let anyone mention the incident (within the game or not).

These disruptions, however, also serve to remind the group that it is fantasy, that it is "only a game."

Sense of Control

This is one of Csikszentmihalyi's more complex formulations. In order to feel "in control," one must paradoxically give up the security of normal life:

what people enjoy is not the sense of *being* in control, but the sense of *exercising* control in difficult situations. It is not possible to experience a feeling of control unless one is willing to give up the safety of protective routines. Only when a doubtful outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether she is in control. (1990:61)

Csikszentmihalyi uses this phenomenon, in part, to explain the appeal of risky or life-threatening leisure pursuits. Instead of viewing hang-gliding as a pathological flirtation with death, Csikszentmihalyi sees it as an attempt at minimizing the risks: "the positive emotion they enjoy is the perfectly healthy feeling of being able to control potentially dangerous forces" (1990:60).

Courting danger is a common theme in most role-playing games. Even the most passive adventures, usually involve some sort of risk. Indeed, one player asked, "Where would the fun be if there were no risks?" (e-mail interview). Part of the fun, for the players, is certainly coming up with strategies to maximize their potential success (and thus minimize their potential failure).

An important aspect of rpgs is that failure has less impact than it does in real life. At worst, one's character

might die, in which case the player can roll up a new one. Furthermore, the player's options seem much broader since he or she might be willing to take risks or engage in actions that he or she would not do in real life. One must still deal with the consequences of one's actions, but since one is at least one step removed from one's character, these consequences do not fully "hit home." This added breadth of options provides a player with an increased sense of control, since he or she feels more capable of overcoming or ignoring outside forces.

For the game master, the game is a massive exercise of control. The GM is constantly attempting to control a simplified, yet vast, reflection of the real world. Watching this creation run smoothly and believably is evidence that one has effectively mastered the chaos of our reality. Within the game world, the game master controls many of the factors that are outside of human control in this world. He or she may use dice to simulate chance, but it is always his or her choice to use the results or to ignore them. One of the game masters quoted earlier eloquently summed this up: "I feel as though I've built a watch, and I'm waiting for it to be wound up, to see how it runs" (e-mail interview).

Reduction of Self-Consciousness

When an individual to fully enters into a flow experience, one loses touch with one's customary concept of self:

in flow there is no room for self-scrutiny. Because enjoyable activities have clear goals, stable rules, and challenges well matched to skills, there is little opportunity for the self to be threatened.
(Csikszentmihalyi 1990:63)

If a tennis player feels self-conscious while playing, he or she will not achieve his or her maximum potential, and the fun of the activity will be lessened.

This loss of self-consciousness is essential for the proper flow of a role-playing game. It is also one of the most difficult aspects for new players to master. When players censor themselves for fear of coming up with "bad" ideas, they never fully become their character. Moreover, players need to forget the social distinctions that may divide them normally. Within the fantasy reality one's "coolness" or "nerdiness" have no bearing (unless one's character is portrayed in such a manner). A questionnaire respondent described good players as people who "can forget work/school social structures and be peers" (e-mail questionnaire).

A few years ago I had a personal experience which highlights the importance of this loss of self-consciousness. I had not played an rpg in years, and was invited to join a group as a player. I joined the game,

excited to play again. During the first few sessions, however, I was very tense. I hardly knew the other players, and whenever our characters got into disagreements I pressured myself to prove my intellectual fortitude by winning the argument. In other words, I was not in flow while portraying my arguing character. The majority of my mind was focused on winning the argument. I feared that the other players would think I was "stupid" if I caved in. As a result, my character was responsible for a defeat of astronomical proportions. I was humiliated.

I realized afterwards that my character would never have supported the disastrous course of action. I had stubbornly stuck with my foolish idea as a competitive player, rather than paying attention to my character. After this disaster I was afraid to show my face in the group, but they did not hold it against me -- making a clear distinction between my character and my *self*. They assumed that my character was a stubborn ass, when in reality it was I that was the boor.

After this realization, I consciously acted as my character in all situations -- never letting my personal pride enter into the picture. This allowed us, as *characters*, to enter into violent debates over various issues. After the game, however, we would all laugh about it. The game was immeasurably more fun, because I finally let myself go and entered into the flow of the event.

For game masters, this loss of self-consciousness is an equally important issue. When the game begins, the GM must forget which players he likes and dislikes, and respond only to the actions of their characters. Otherwise the players quickly realize that the GM is not impartial, and the fantasy is ruptured.

When the GM and all the players are unself-consciously flowing in the game, it can look quite absurd to the outside observer. Normally shy people may be shouting at the tops of their lungs; the GM might stand and gesticulate wildly, making absurd sound effects to signify wind or a creaky door; and the "coolest" member of the bunch might be ridiculed by the other players. The players are caught up in the full flow of the dramatic event -- completely absorbed within the fantasy.

Distorted Sense of Time

The final effect of flow, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is a distortion of one's subjective sense of time. During flow experiences one usually loses track of time, and hours can pass by in what feels like minutes. Occasionally the reverse occurs and one feels that minutes stretch into hours.

Both of these effects are common in role-playing games. Often a group will get together to play for a few hours and end up playing until dawn. I recently observed a portion of a game that went on for fourteen straight hours, and this is

not especially unique.²⁵ When the game participants reach the flow state the hours literally fly by. I have recorded game sessions where characters engaged in an extended conversation for four hours. Rarely did the players ever step out of character for the duration. This sense of timelessness is equally as intense for the game master as for the players. When all them are focused on the fantasy reality, real time ceases to have its usual meaning.

The sense of time slowing down also occurs, but much more rarely. Occasionally during the most intensely suspenseful situations, every second seems to take an eternity, while the player waits in suspense for the GM to roll a key die or to describe what lies beyond the iron door.

It is interesting to note that while the subjective time of the players is distorted during a game, the time that their characters experience is also distorted. As mentioned earlier, the GM can cause months to pass with a mere phrase. Similarly, a tense battle might only last ten minutes within the fantasy reality, but may take three hours to play out around the table. This lack of connection between fantasy time and real time can further compound the distortions that the participants feel: "It is difficult to grasp the fact that it is 4:30 am on a cold Friday night

²⁵ Most games, of course, do not last so long. This long game is interesting in that the players were not consciously attempting to play for an extended period. The game just kept on going. It was a climactic episode in the campaign. Some groups get together for the explicit purpose of trying to play for days, but these are special cases.

after we have just spent three weeks traversing a burning desert to retrieve the buried papyri of Nemaatré" (personal interview).

SUMMARY

Flow is a powerful theory which provides a link between diverse experiences of pleasure. The theory is well suited to explain the experience of fun in role-playing games. In particular, it provides a rationale for the intense amount of work that goes into the game. Such effort makes the fantasy reality more "real" and thus more capable of sustaining flow.

In addition, the theory of flow seems capable of explaining shortfalls in particular games. If a game is not "working," one could examine the flow variables specified above in order to explain this. Perhaps the challenges are not suited to the players' level of skill. Or, maybe there are too many interruptions for players to achieve proper concentration and depth. This, of course, is of primary use to gamers themselves, rather than to the outside analyst. By understanding the internal dynamics of role-playing games, however, scholars gain a clearer understanding of the appeal of this form of play.

CONCLUSION

This thesis barely scratches the surface of the scholarly potential of role-playing games. My goal was to provide a cogent description of what role-playing games are and how they developed over time. I have also taken up a central question concerning this genre of games: what makes them fun? Through questionnaires and interviews I have provided an insider's perspective on this question. Additionally, I suggested a theoretical perspective to aid in understanding the enjoyment of such a complex play form.

As I have argued in Chapter 1, role-playing games have a lot to offer numerous disciplines. Most of the social sciences and humanities could learn a great deal by studying this play form. As a way of wrapping up, I will suggest an anthropological approach. I will examine the broader context of role-playing games and discuss their connections with other aspects of American culture.

RPGs AND CULTURE

In Chapter 1, I suggested that role-playing games may be linked to other cultural domains in a significant way. Literature and film are two domains that illustrate this relationship well. Fantasy literature became increasingly popular along with the growth of *Dungeons and Dragons* and other role-playing games. Heroic adventure movies, often

with fantastic settings, also developed during this time period.

Role-playing games share a number of thematic characteristics with these other media forms. Why did these themes become so popular during the seventies and eighties? After an examination of role-playing games we are in a better position to attempt an answer to this question.

In Chapter 2, players often stressed the fact that role-playing games provide an escape from reality. Role-playing games are almost invariably set within fantastic realities quite different from our own. The flow section further expands on this escape theme, suggesting that in order for rpgs to provide flow, the players *must* escape from the confines of their regular consciousnesses.

Often the term "escape" is used with negative connotations in Western culture. People are often criticized for engaging in "escapist" activities, thus dodging the very real responsibilities of their lives. Certainly, some people do avoid their responsibilities. I do not think, however, that "escape" is being given justice. In a 1938 essay on fairy-tales, J.R.R. Tolkien writes concerning escape:

Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. [. . .] Why should we not escape from or condemn the "grim Assyrian" absurdity of top-hats, or the Morlockian horror of factories? (Tolkien 1966:79-82)

Tolkien makes a distinction between the escape of "desertion" and true, heroic escape. In the latter form, Tolkien argues, one can find truths and reach a level of awareness that might be clouded in "reality."

This interpretation of escape fits well with the idea of flow as an activity that involves strong and distinct purpose, without any of the extraneous details that usually "cloud" our thoughts. The players themselves view it as this sort of positive escape -- escape to a realm of distinct meaning, "where the gods are interactive with people and challenges and purpose exist freely" (questionnaire response).

Escape is an act, taking you from an undesirable somewhere to a preferable place. In order to escape, one must be escaping *from* something. If gamers are escaping to a realm of meaning, perhaps they are escaping from a realm of meaninglessness. The majority of gamers are in the high-school/college age range. These are liminal periods in a person's life, where one is experiencing the awkward transformation from childhood to adulthood. The search for meaning is a regular quest for people in these age groups. As they grow up, they observe a world far more chaotic than they expected. They need to fend off this chaos by constructing a new and more robust system of meaning.

Role-playing games depict a reality where chaos is held at bay by the actions of individuals. Randomness can be

minimized by careful planning, and one's plans come to fruition much faster than they do in real life. The popularity of role-playing games among adolescents and young adults can be traced to this meaning-building function.

By taking this a step further we can begin to explain the thematic similarities between role-playing games and other cultural domains. During the 1960s and early seventies, American culture was in a state of upheaval, questioning everything. The civil rights movement protested racial stereotypes. Radical feminism reorganized our perception of gender. The anti-war movement caused national insecurity, and tarnished the post World War brilliance of Uncle Sam. Ideas of free love and a more open sexuality threatened to destroy the institution of the family. In Peter Berger's terms, our sacred canopy was coming crashing down around our ears.

A time of cultural transformation can be likened to a liminal stage in an individual's life. Liminality on a mass scale -- a dynamic time when a culture grows and changes more rapidly than usual, as its social maintenance structures are reevaluated. As our culture deconstructed portions of itself, we were increasingly faced with anomie and meaninglessness.

If role-playing games provide meaning for individuals, perhaps the heroic/fantastic themes in film and literature provide meaning to a larger cultural audience. I suggest

that role-playing games are an integral part of this process of cultural renewal, fueling and being fueled by other cultural methods of anomie reduction.